

## 7. ‘Trieste is beautiful at night’

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At that moment, from the mountain, I could see the lights of the city on the water. Seeing them was a great moment of happiness in my life. On the border at night, from the mountain, Trieste is very beautiful.  
(Refugee interviewed in the documentary *Trieste è bella di notte*)

*Trieste è bella di notte* (literally, ‘Trieste is beautiful at night’<sup>1</sup>) is the title of a powerful 2023 documentary by Matteo Calore, Stefano Collizzolli, and Andrea Segre that focuses on key moments during undocumented migrants’ traversal of the Balkan Route. The 75-minute film highlights at least two aspects of migrants’ experiences during this dangerous journey that speak to the theme of this chapter: first, several scenes were shot in some of the make-shift camps that punctuate the corridor, where migrants live for short periods while waiting to attempt their next informal border crossing; second, the documentary scrutinizes events surrounding the pushback operations implemented by the Italian authorities on the border with Slovenia in 2020, which were the subject of much controversy and, above all, were ultimately found to have been ‘illegal’ per a court ruling issued in Rome the following year.<sup>2</sup> The documentary dwells extensively on the testimonies of the migrants themselves, especially some of those who had managed to reach Trieste, Italy, viewed by many as the ‘end’ of the Balkan Route, or at least as the end of one of its main branches – namely, the segment that runs from Bosnia and Herzegovina to the Adriatic city of Trieste via Croatia and Slovenia (see Minca & Collins, 2021; Minca & Umek, 2020).

The title of the documentary, which has been screened throughout Italy, attracting considerable interest, is inspired by one of its final scenes, in which a migrant interviewed at a Trieste reception centre, in the moving words quoted above, describes his joy at seeing the lights of Trieste from on high for the first

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<sup>1</sup> The title of the documentary was officially translated into English as ‘*Trieste Shines at Night*’ (Calore et al., 2023).

<sup>2</sup> ‘Ordinanza’ n. R.G. 56420/2020 of 28/01/2021.

time, a joy that was bound up with the feeling of having ‘made it’, of having completed his perilous journey towards Western Europe and across the many hostile borders that are part of this informal corridor through the Balkans. Although there is no consensus in the relevant ‘grey’ literature that Trieste is the final point of arrival for most migrants coming from the Balkan Route – indeed, it appears that depending on the period only between 15 and 25% of arrivals actually stop and ask for asylum there – in opening this chapter, we attribute crucial importance to the sentiment expressed by the migrant in the documentary – and by many others we have interviewed in recent months – of having reached the end of the ‘Game’, of having arrived somewhere in Western Europe, and of finally at least being safe (for a detailed description of the ‘Game’, see Chapter 1 in this volume; also Minca & Collins, 2021).

Hence, in this chapter, we set out to ‘think like the Balkan Route’ from one of its arrival points: the Adriatic city of Trieste, located only a few kilometres from the border with Slovenia. Partly in response to the relative dearth of academic literature on Trieste’s role in this informal corridor – a role that has nevertheless received much scrutiny in the Italian media and in reports by local organizations supporting migrants – we begin our analysis with the ‘bird’s-eye’ view of the city evoked in the epigraph. This perspective represents the moment when most migrants, having made their way to the Italian border on foot through the forest, catch their first glimpse of Trieste as they emerge from the woods that have sheltered them right up to the edge of the karst ridge overlooking the city they are about to enter.

In previous work, we have discussed how the migrants’ – finally ‘free’ – pathway into the city (and Italy) almost always leads to what we have defined as the core ‘refugee hub’ in Trieste: Piazza della Libertà, a garden square in front of the train station (Umek & Minca, 2024b). As we discovered in the course of multiple interviews, the majority of migrants who reached Trieste were already aware of this place before their arrival. They identified it as a key location where they can become fully visible, receive humanitarian assistance, and begin the process of obtaining recognition for their protection status. As documented in the next sections, the reception system and the experience of ‘having arrived’ do not always match their expectations. Many migrants, although ‘registered’ and therefore legally present in the country, have been de facto ‘abandoned’ by the institutions in the ill-concealed hope that they will leave and ultimately become the ‘problem’ of other cities in Italy or even other countries in Europe (see International Rescue Committee [IRC] et al., 2024: 10–12).

All this has generated, and continues to generate as we write, what we might describe as a consolidated informal refugee<sup>3</sup> geography in certain key areas of the city. This geography is connected in a complex and somewhat ambivalent manner to the presence of two official reception centres, the provision of formal assistance by the national authorities, the policy of 'implicit abandonment' implemented to some degree by the municipal authorities, and the crucial support activities carried out by volunteers and humanitarian organizations in Piazza della Libertà and across the city (IRC Italy, 2024a). In this chapter, therefore, we reflect on the tension between the perspective of hope that Trieste offers to refugees who have successfully completed the Balkan Route and finally arrived in this Adriatic city, which is in any case one of the leading gateways to Western Europe, and the forms of 'spatial harassment' enacted against them by the local authorities. In parallel, we also explore how the refugees themselves 'see the Route from Trieste' – or 'see Trieste as part of the Route' – and how support and solidarity networks have elected Trieste to play the key symbolic role that, until recently, was largely assigned to other 'refugee hubs' along this informal migration corridor, such as Bihać in Bosnia and Herzegovina (see Chapter 6, this volume).

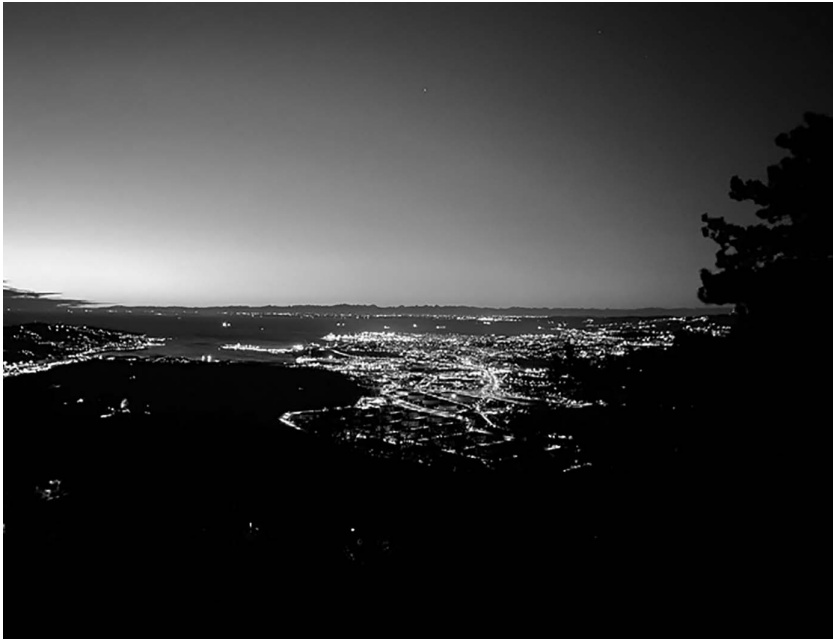
## THRESHOLDS

At one point, *Trieste è bella di notte* shows a striking image of Trieste and its gulf from above. The vantage point is inside Slovenia, just a few kilometres over the border. From this spot, migrants arriving from the Route descend, not without risk to their bodily safety, a steep path down a karst slope. After several hours of walking, sometimes even after spending another night in the 'jungle' in a makeshift camp that has hosted people-on-the-move for years, they cross the border and prepare to enter the city. The view is not only highly evocative, but in the imagination of the migrants we interviewed – many of whom had entered Italy via this path – it represents the last stage in their journey across the Balkans, the final push before making themselves visible again and, in many cases, before asking for protection without fear of being rejected or, even worse, physically attacked and pushed back (see Figure 7.1).

It is worth dwelling for a moment or two on this threshold between the 'city' and the 'forest', which is also a threshold between visibility and invisibility for many of the undocumented migrants who travel along sections of this onerous route. Indeed, the interplay between visibility and invisibility is key to

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<sup>3</sup> In the Introduction, we note that different chapters use different terminology. Since most migrants register as 'asylum seekers' in Trieste, we prefer to use the term refugee when we quote them.



*Source:* Photo by the authors, December 2024.

*Figure 7.1* View of Trieste from the Karst Plateau

understanding the geography of this informal migration corridor as a whole. To explore this interplay ‘from Trieste’ – which often reflects the broader interplay between formal and informal refugee spatialities along the entire Balkan Route – we conducted, in 2023 and 2024, fifty-two semi-structured and four walk-along interviews with migrants who had arrived in Trieste. We were fortunate to be assisted in this research by Shahid Aziz, the cultural mediator for the European Research Council (ERC) project TheGAME. Most of the interviewees were awaiting a decision on their asylum applications and had not been allocated a place at a reception centre, leaving them to fend for themselves and forcing them to sleep rough in the city for months on end. These interviews were complemented by a detailed and continuous analysis of news coverage on the presence of migrants in Trieste, as well as numerous reports published by various non-governmental organizations (NGOs), particularly Consorzio Italiano di Solidarietà (ICS), International Rescue Committee Italia (IRC Italy), Diaconia Valdese, and other humanitarian organizations (IRC et al., 2024).

During these anonymous interviews we focused extensively on the issue of strategic (or tactical) (in)visibility and the associated risks for groups and individuals. We relatedly sought to understand how the interviewees had experienced arriving in Trieste after such a long journey. While avoiding the specifics of individual border crossings, we explored the connections between the border violence perpetrated by the authorities in some Balkan countries, together with the risks and anxieties of walking through forests, mountains, or open fields and along railway tracks, and the migrants' perceptions of Trieste as an actual or potential end point of 'the Game'. Nearly all the migrants interviewed had travelled to the city via Bosnia and Herzegovina, although not all who enter Croatia from that border necessarily end up in Trieste, which has become a reference point for Afghans, Pakistanis, and Bengalis in particular. While we describe here the routes taken, let us be clear about one thing: this is not sensitive information, because everyone in Trieste involved in the 'management' and support of migrants knows about these routes.

Trieste featured in the retrospective accounts of the migrants who took part in our research as a sort of mythical space within the collective imaginary surrounding the Route. It is frequently identified as such within the extensive web of messaging and contacts that people-on-the-move share with their peers via mobile phone and social media in the course of their migratory journey. When not acquired via the 'migrant grapevine', this information is routinely provided by smugglers, who sometimes accompany the migrants all the way into the city, while at other times briefing them before dropping them off near the border. Indeed, most of the interviewees knew before they arrived there that Trieste was a safe place to stop. Even if they were apprehended by the authorities after entering Italian territory – they claimed – this would not imply any risk of being pushed back, but simply of being taken to a centre for identification. They were aware that from Trieste they could travel with relative freedom to other Italian and European destinations. Finally, they confirmed that there were various access points to the city through the forest and that these access points were not usually patrolled; they also knew in advance that once they arrived, they would be largely free to leave the forest, go to the nearest village, and take a bus to the city centre.

I didn't know it before [the city], but when I saw it from the mountain it seemed very beautiful. I understood the next day that I was finally in Trieste [...] (Refugee from Pakistan, 28, interviewed in Pashtu, Trieste, August 2023)

[...] what I had heard about Trieste made me happy thinking about the fact that we would be far from the difficulties and that we would be able to apply for asylum. (Refugee from Pakistan, 21, interviewed in Urdu, Trieste, July 2023)

For some time, one of the main points of access to Trieste has been the Val Rosandra (the Rosandra Valley) and the village of Bagnoli located at a key exit point of the same valley. More recently, the woods around the official Ferneti border crossing have become a further point of entry. In the latter case, many interviewed migrants have taken the train to Sežana in Slovenia and then walked along a trail normally used by hikers and cyclists to the village of Orlek and from there to the village of Trebiciano, which is already in Italy. Here, they boarded bus number 51 and entered the city relatively unnoticed. Some, in order to avoid being intercepted by the Slovenian authorities, got off the train earlier and walked through the forest. Once again, the forest protected them from the eyes of the authorities until, once in Italy, they could 'reveal themselves' and even use public transport:

Two of my companions arrived [in Italy] before us and told us that we had to take bus number 51 first and then bus number 4 to go down to the city. The first thing we did was go to Piazza della Libertà. Some of the guys in our group continued their journey to Milan or other countries but I preferred to stay here in Italy, in Trieste. (Refugee from Pakistan, 28, interviewed in Pashtu, August 2023)

Perhaps this is why Trieste, seen from above and especially at night, is so beautiful in the eyes of the migrants arriving from the Balkan Route. From above, at a certain point, the city materializes, and becomes a concrete destination, whatever the viewers' final goal and destination may be. More specifically, it represents the end of the Game and, above all, of the multiple risks associated with this endeavour (see Chapter 1, this volume).

All in all, from the point of view of the authorities (despite some of the official rhetoric), these are borders that make little sense to patrol in their entirety, amongst other reasons because, as mentioned above, even when the Italian authorities intercept migrants on the road as they approach Trieste, they are still obliged to take them to the identification centre and offer them the possibility of initiating the asylum procedure. These relatively 'soft' border practices are undoubtedly linked to the currently intense (and historically important) local cross-border relations between Italy and Slovenia in this part of Europe (Battisti, 1979; Del Bianco & Gasparini, 2008: 37–42; also, Bufon & Minghi, 2020). They may, however, be influenced by recent geopolitical developments in the region. For example, Slovenia's new progressive government since 2022 has been relatively more tolerant of migrants, while the suspension of Schengen at this border by the Italian authorities since October 2023 has been justified by perceived increased security concerns linked to the new war scenarios in the Middle East (Lusa, 2024).

At the same time, the migrants' narratives allow us to reconstruct their perspective on the Balkan Route as they now perceive it from Trieste. The Route

is typically represented as a long and painful experience and an extremely dangerous journey across countries with names that are often difficult to remember and pronounce, and borders patrolled by hostile authorities and sophisticated and expensive technologies. It includes stops at official camps where the migrants managed to find refuge (whose names, however, they cannot always recall) and at others where they were forcibly detained, as well as stays in squats, safe houses, and other informal shelters. Above all, however, the Route is associated with long journeys on foot – often lasting days, if not weeks – through forests, continuing in all weather, with scant access to water and food, crossing rivers and streams, and enduring the hardship and fear of nights sleeping in the rough, hoping not to be intercepted by the police.

I almost always slept outside, I spent the nights in places where I couldn't even stretch out and so I slept sitting up. Once, while I was sleeping in the woods, I heard animal noises and that time I was really scared. Sometimes I even slept in a sleeping bag. I repeat, being in the woods was really very difficult [...] (Refugee from Afghanistan, 28, interviewed in Pashtu, March 2024)

I don't know what city we were in but we continued our journey without stopping. The journey usually took place at night after 02:00. I didn't stop. We slept in the woods, in ruins, abandoned structures and sometimes in the safe houses of the smugglers. (Refugee from Pakistan, 24, interviewed in Urdu, May 2024)

These narratives – which are shaped to some degree by the fact that all the interviewees had successfully 'made it to the end' – point to the constant interplay between the need to become invisible by blending into the forest or sheltering in abandoned buildings under harsh and precarious conditions, and the parallel need to use public transport infrastructures, such as train and bus stations or even taxi stands, to visit key locations to make contact with and meet smugglers and other migrants, or even to deliberately and strategically enter a reception centre in Bosnia and Herzegovina or Serbia in order to receive temporary assistance and support before continuing onwards along the Route.

I took the bus to go first to Belgrade, from there I took another bus to go to the border with Bosnia, I don't remember the name of the place where I arrived and there wasn't even the facilitator with us. He was waiting for us near the border, he had sent us the coordinates of the place where he was waiting for us. In fact, when we arrived at the border, he was waiting for us, he helped us cross the border with Bosnia in a rubber dinghy then we went to the camp in Sarajevo. (Refugee from Pakistan, 20, interviewed in Dari, July 2024)

In another work produced in the context of this project, the first author insisted at length on the relationship between forest and city as a useful conceptual entry point for understanding the geographies of the Balkan Route (see

Carter-White & Minca, 2025). Presenting the critical threshold between ‘the forest’ and ‘the city’ as key to understanding what Giorgio Agamben (1998) has famously termed the ‘structure of the ban’ – that is to say, the processes of exclusionary inclusion of certain groups and individuals that characterize the functioning of the modern nation-state – he emphasized the role of this threshold in determining how migrants travelling the Route are both excluded and ‘held back’ by the nation states they pass through.

These people-on-the-move need to be kept away from the city but always retain the potential to reappear there. Perhaps this is why border authorities often strip migrants apprehended in the forest of their shoes and phones, before releasing them back into the jungle wilderness in their ‘state of nature’, so to speak [...]. The migrants’ ban to the forest also serves to perpetuate an image of them as a wild and unruly presence from which (European) society must be immunized. (Carter-White & Minca, 2025: 182, 181)

We also suggested, in line with our earlier work on Agamben’s theory of the sovereign exception (Minca, 2007), that the city metaphorically represents the *civitas* – to again borrow from the terminology of the Italian political philosopher (Agamben, 1998) – while the forest represents the *selva*, or all-that-is-not-*civitas*. The *selva* is the space where those who do not have the right to a place make themselves invisible. They engage in dehumanizing forms of ‘returning to nature’ – indeed, in the case of people-on-the-move along the Balkan Route, they are forced to do so by the border regimes in force in the territories they cross to reach their desired destination.

Both of these spatial concepts include literal and metaphorical dimensions: *civitas* refers to ‘the city’ as an actual place, but also as a principle of civilization (Giaccaria & Minca, 2011: 68–69), meaning that even the development of rural landscapes and regions could be considered part of the spatial production of the *civitas* [...]. *Selva*, in turn, refers not only to actual forests, but also denotes a principle of untamed and brutal nature. These can be considered spatial counterparts of the anthropophorous human-animal relation since, analogous to the latter, *civitas* is fundamentally produced through the separation and exclusion of all those spaces associated with the *selva*. (Carter-White & Minca, 2025: 145)

We lack the space here to elaborate on the structure of this ‘refugee ban’ across the Route as a whole, but instead refer readers to our previous extensive analysis of the troubled geographies of this migratory corridor (Ibid.). Suffice it to remark that the Balkan Route is both constituted and experienced by migrants as an endless and complex geographical interplay between the city/*civitas* – in the squares that are key for them (Afghan Park in Belgrade, Victoria Square in Athens, Piazza della Libertà in Trieste, etc.), in the stations and on the trains and buses, etc. – and the forest/*selva* as a space where migrants are not only

hidden in order to conceal them from the eyes of the authorities and local communities but also dehumanized and exposed to the intemperance of nature (see, again, Minca, 2023; Vaughan-Williams, 2015, 2017). So how may we read Trieste and the Route in the light of these brief considerations? How may we go deeper into the question of whether Trieste is truly 'beautiful at night'?

First, as mentioned earlier, the migrants we interviewed confirmed that once in Trieste, they felt free from the violence they had often experienced during their journey across the Balkans. But perhaps more importantly, they stated that once in Trieste, they could consciously become visible again, revealing their refugee status and entering the city as subjects on-the-move, entitled to be welcomed and considered for protection. This transition from *selva* to *civitas*, this threshold, which is a crucial part of the Trieste borderscape, features in their accounts as the very end of the Balkan Route, as the gateway to 'Europe' and, consequently, as their entrance into a new political geography.

[...] my goal was to get here to Italy and so for me everything ended here. For me the end of the Game is here in Trieste. Instead, other friends of mine who came with me continued their journey to other European countries [...] The difficulties end here. Some continue to other countries, but they have no difficulties and they are not afraid of the police. Their lives are not in danger, they are not afraid of being readmitted to previous countries and they do not encounter other problems along their journey. (Refugee from Pakistan, 33, interviewed in Pashtu, June 2023)

This perception likely underpins many of the details that, in their description of this 'passage', mark the migrants' preparations for 'arrival'. These usually commence on the last night, often spent in the woods around Bagnoli, in the nearby municipality of San Dorligo della Valle. Here, after changing into clean clothes, they abandon their rucksacks, sleeping bags, and other equipment needed to survive in the woods, and walk to the first inhabited areas, where they look for a bus stop or continue on foot towards the city/*civitas* (see Figure 7.2). At this point, they have almost regained their right to become visible once and for all.

Near the border with Italy, the facilitator told us that the track we were walking on led inside the Italian territory and if something happened, we would have to continue walking on the track to enter Italy. In short, we walked from Bosnia to Trieste. It took us about 16 days to get to Trieste. [...] When I came down from the mountain of Trieste I was walking and I was stopped by the police. He took me to the tent where after having photographed me they sent me to a camp because the Corona virus was still. (Refugee from Afghanistan, 34, interviewed in Pashtu, July 2024)

When I arrived, I was very tired, I rested for a while on the mountain then I went down to the city. Here the police took me and took me to the camp. From there I went independently to Gorizia. (Refugee from Afghanistan, 18, interviewed in Pashtu, March 2024)



Source: Photo by the authors, November 2022.

Figure 7.2 *Abandoned clothes in the woods near the village of Bagnoli della Rosandra (Trieste)*

Other migrants enter via Sežana, arriving by train but still bearing the traces of their perilous journey through forests on their skin. Trieste-as-*civitas* awaits them. With all its disappointments and complications, it nevertheless represents the end of the *selva*. But does it really? Is Trieste also beautiful in full daylight?

## IS TRIESTE THE NEW BIHAĆ?

In 2023, over 16,000 migrants arrived in Trieste from the Balkan Route and were largely registered in the Italian reception system. However, many others passed through the city without stopping, a contingent for which nobody has an accurate count (IRC Italy, 2024a: 1–5). In early 2024, these numbers somewhat decreased, partly due to a tightening of control measures on the Croatian border with Bosnia and Herzegovina. Nevertheless, Trieste continues to see a regular stream of arrivals. As we write, anything between 30 and 60 people arrive in Piazza della Libertà each day (IRC Italy, 2024b). When they enter the square – sometimes accompanied by facilitators, but mostly on their own in small groups – they are usually greeted by other migrants, volunteers,

or the humanitarian organizations that are a daily presence at this site and who advise them to register as soon as possible to access formal assistance and support. Elsewhere, we have described in detail the formal and informal geographies of Trieste's putative 'refugee hub', which is concentrated around the train and bus stations (Umek & Minca, 2024a). In that intervention, we emphasized that Piazza della Libertà, in particular, has long served as a primary location for providing direct humanitarian assistance to migrants arriving from the Balkan Route; it has also acted as a key meeting point for connecting with other migrants already in the city and with smugglers for those looking to continue their journey.

There are two official refugee camps in the Trieste area, both located outside the city: a former scout camp, now commonly referred to by migrants as 'Campo Sacro', which is situated near the village of Prosecco on the Trieste Karst; and Casa Malala, a reception centre near the Ferneti border crossing, also on the Karst Plateau. Together, the two camps house around 200 people. During our visits there, the residents appeared to be living in relatively difficult conditions given that both facilities are quite run down. In addition to these two centres, both run by Caritas, around 1,000 migrants awaiting asylum are accommodated in what is recognized nationally as an experimental form of 'diffused hospitality'. This 'diffused' hospitality system utilizes apartments in various parts of the city to avoid housing asylum seekers in camps, with a view to making their presence more 'organic' to urban daily life. Other key sites where assistance is provided to migrants in need include: the Centro Diurno (Day Centre) in Via Udine, which is also close to the railway station and Piazza della Libertà, is run by the Comunità di San Martino al Campo, and offers vital support to those sleeping rough in the city; the Caritas canteen in Via dell'Istria; and other smaller sleeping facilities that are mainly used at peak times (Umek & Minca, 2024a: 51–56).

In addition to formal accommodation are what we term as the informal refugee geographies of the city, which are often associated with people-on-the-move spending the night in or around Piazza della Libertà or near the railway station. Some migrants only stay in Trieste for a few hours before catching the first available train to Milan. However, others end up in informal accommodation for much longer periods. The most important informal site was the 'Silos', a huge, abandoned building next to the train and bus station, which was used for years as a squat by migrants arriving from the Route (Altin, 2020; see also Carter-White & Minca, 2025); here suffice it to recall that for a long time, and especially over the last two years, the Silos was home to hundreds of 'registered' migrants who were abandoned by the authorities. At the same time, it also hosted the emergence of various forms of everyday informal sociality among migrants (Carter-White & Minca, 2025). The Silos sometimes housed up to 500 people, the majority of whom had previously initiated the process of

establishing their right to asylum. The authorities had simply instructed them to wait to be called back for an interview. If their interview had already taken place, they were told to await the final decision. In theory, these individuals were entitled to a place in a reception centre. But when the camps were full, there was literally nowhere for them to go, and so most of them ended up sleeping in the Silos – which truly became an informal refugee camp – or in other squats around the station (Pretto 2023; TriestePrima 2023).

Over time, the Silos has taken on the status of an unruly, almost mythical place – borne out by the accounts of many migrants and the volunteers who assist them. In many ways, this place resembles other informal ‘residential’ refugee camps that have sprung up at different times and under different circumstances along the Balkan Route: these camps too have become almost monumental sites, if only in the memory and imagination of migrants and their solidarity networks (Jordan & Minca, 2023a, 2023b). Given the precarious living conditions of hundreds of people forced to reside in this large makeshift camp, the Silos became the subject of national headlines, which have long denounced the scandal of this ‘provoked’ humanitarian emergency (ANSA, 2024; Candito, 2024; Schiavone, 2024). However, for some of the migrants we interviewed, the Silos also represented an important space of freedom and self-organization, where they experienced not only discomfort and unhealthy living conditions, but also a great deal of solidarity and meaningful forms of social life, often organized around ‘clusters’ of tents, and sometimes along ethnic lines (see Figure 7.3).

To eat I sometimes go to the Caritas canteen<sup>4</sup> and sometimes I don’t go there at all because it’s about a 40-minute walk away and you can’t take the bus because you get fined by the ticket inspector! For this reason, we often cook with friends in Silos. (Refugee from Afghanistan, 26, interviewed in Pashtu, Trieste, February 2024)

When the Silos was finally evacuated in June 2024 (Baraggino & Tieri, 2024; De Filippo, 2024; Il Post, 2024), partly in response to an endless string of complaints and petitions from local organizations and civil society at large calling for more decent accommodation for all migrants (TriestePrima, 2024), other squats immediately sprang up in the Porto Vecchio area, just behind the station. These are mostly run by smugglers and migrants who had previously congregated around the Silos (Sarti, 2024; Fieldnotes, October 2024).

In light of these brief reflections on the refugee geographies in Trieste, we will spend the remainder of this chapter exploring two aspects of the city’s role

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<sup>4</sup> The Caritas canteen is where refugees and asylum seekers are offered free meals on a daily basis.



Source: Photo by the authors, 20 June 2024.

Figure 7.3 Inside the Silos the day before the eviction

vis-à-vis the Balkan Route, before finally formulating some conclusions. The first aspect of note concerns the considerable interest that Trieste has recently attracted among activists, journalists, and researchers; the second has to do with the ambiguous position of the authorities regarding the continued presence of migrants from the Route in the city.

As previously noted, narratives of the Balkan Route since 2015 have emphasized the importance of a series of locations that, for various reasons, have become highly symbolic of the 'choking' strategies (Tazzioli, 2020) imposed on migrant mobility by the border policies of the various countries involved. However, these places also symbolize the related forms of resistance enacted by volunteers and by the migrants themselves. Examples include the notorious Moria camp in Lesbos during the first phase of the humanitarian crisis in 2015 and 2016 (but also in later periods until its closure in 2020 after the outbreak of a large fire), or the huge makeshift camp that emerged in Idomeni on the border between Greece and North Macedonia in spring 2016. Other key sites are the self-managed space at the Plaza Hotel in Athens (Raimondi, 2019), the

square in the heart of Belgrade that came to be dubbed ‘Afghan Park’ when it was populated by migrants and smugglers between 2015 and 2022 (Umek & Minca, 2024a: 61–66), and the well-known makeshift camp called ‘The Barracks’ that sprang up in abandoned buildings at Belgrade’s former railway station and was occupied by up to 2,000 people in the winter of 2016–2017 before being demolished and replaced by an internationally renowned waterfront (Wright, 2015; see, also, Chapter 5, this volume). However, we might also mention the town of Bihać and, more generally, the canton of Una-Sana in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which, according to Jordan (2024), has – since 2018 – represented a leading ‘transit hub’ for migrants on the Balkan Route. As such, this city has long attracted both international media interest and a large number of volunteers and international humanitarian organizations. Not surprisingly therefore, the situation of migrants in Bihać has been the focus of much of the recent academic literature on the Balkan Route, as reviewed in Chapter 6 of this volume.

In recent years, and especially from 2022 onwards, Trieste has received similar attention due to the significant increase in arrivals from the Balkan Route and the growing proportions of the migrant population forced to live between the Silos, Piazza della Libertà, and the official camps. The tendency of researchers to mainly track ‘crisis’ situations, especially when they are widely covered by the international media, has not yet been sufficiently scrutinized in relation to the Balkan Route, although the ‘over-researching’ of certain themes or areas related to migration has been extensively examined in the literature in relation to other migratory phenomena around the world (see, among others, Pascucci, 2017; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2012). Be that as it may, during our extensive fieldwork in Trieste and our participant observation of Piazza della Libertà, the Silos, and other key sites for the city’s ‘refugee hub’, we have recently noticed a growing number of individuals and groups who have come to Trieste to study the situation there and, at the same time, to assist the migrants (see, for instance, OBC, 2024).

Interestingly, some of these parties had already been to Bihać or other ‘hot’ points along the Route; still others went to Bihać after visiting Trieste, as though to confirm the link between the two cities, which appear to be naturally viewed as belonging to the same informal migration corridor. Indeed, according to our extensive participant observation and the many informal conversations we have had in recent months, not a week goes by without a new group of activists or representatives of humanitarian organizations, who are mostly but not exclusively Italian, as well as journalists and researchers from various countries, displaying interest in the migrant situation in Trieste and particularly in Piazza della Libertà and the Silos. We were informally told that among the migrants, it is joked that in Piazza della Libertà there can sometimes be more volunteers and researchers than migrants! While, as noted at

the outset, there is currently a lack of substantial academic publications on the situation in Trieste, we expect this to change dramatically over the coming months, in line with what has happened in recent years in the case of Bihać, which is arguably one of the most researched sites along the Balkan Route (Minca & Umek, 2020; Zocchi, 2023, 2024; for a more comprehensive review, see Chapter 6, this volume). This is especially likely given that much of the previous academic literature on the Balkan Route has concentrated on the sites that received intense international media coverage and were characterized by dramatic events, a strong presence of volunteers and international organizations and, above all, the visibility of migrants in public spaces – an issue that we shall revisit in the conclusions.

This brings us to the second aspect we set out to analyse in this final section, namely the way in which the authorities have managed (or neglected to manage) the significant ongoing presence of migrants in Trieste in recent years. It should be pointed out here that this strong presence of migrants in Trieste's public spaces is mainly due to the fact that in Italy the right to asylum is a genuine reality: once migrants have entered Italian territory, as mentioned above, they can safely make themselves visible, coming out of the *selva* and publicly claiming their right to protection. With the increasing securitization of migrant mobility and border management in most of the countries along the Route, the presence of migrants in the public spaces of cities, which was quite common in the summer of 2015 and the years immediately afterwards, has essentially become a thing of the past. In other words, apart from a few places in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Trieste, migrants along the Route have become invisible, with the exception of those living in official camps (KlikAktiv, 2024a: 27, 2024b: 15–21).

To return to the situation in Trieste, although the city has a well-established reception system that can accommodate over 1,000 asylum seekers at any one time, and a longstanding and effective solidarity network that has been welcoming arriving migrants for years and assisting them to enter the reception system, the capacity of the two official camps has long been entirely inadequate vis-à-vis the number of people awaiting a decision on their asylum applications. Despite repeated protests by humanitarian organizations and, more generally, from sectors of the press and of civil society, the authorities have long refused to consider opening a new camp in Trieste to accommodate all those entitled to hospitality (TriestePrima, 2024). Moreover, the transfer of some of these asylum seekers to other reception centres on Italian territory has generally been delayed, partial, and wholly unpredictable, while, according to our interviewees, the attempts of many newly arrived immigrants to register at the *Questura* (the police headquarters) have often encountered bureaucratic impediments such as overcrowded offices, inadequate opening hours, and repeated invitations to come back another day.

When I went there [to the police station] they didn't even accept my application because there were so many people who wanted to do it. Every day they called 3 or 4 Afghans, 3 or 4 Pakistanis, 3 or 4 Bengalis and 3 or 4 Indians; the rest of the group they sent back. (Refugee from Pakistan, 22, interviewed in Urdu, Trieste, July 2023)

I went to the police station every day but they didn't take my asylum request, yesterday they took me from the Silos during the police raid and they took me to the police station to make the asylum request. Lots of people go there and they only take 8 people a day and the others have to go back another day. (Refugee from Pakistan, 21, interviewed in Urdu, March 2024)

The upshot of this policy, which Sanyal (2017) and others have described as a 'no camp policy', has been to leave hundreds of registered asylum seekers with no alternative but to sleep on the streets, whether in makeshift accommodation such as the Silos, or without any accommodation at all. Elsewhere (Carter-White & Minca, 2025), we have argued that this policy of non-intervention is associated with the progressive debilitation of the migrants (see Puar, 2017; also Davies et al., 2024), who are reduced to living in the precarious conditions of what amounts to an urban *selva* characterized by rats, disease, rubbish, and 'open air' toilets. Not to mention the fact that, during the winter months, these people are exposed to the elements, in particular the cold, the wind, and especially the rain, and that much of this informal space is often flooded. In addition, the Silos and the area around Piazza della Libertà, besides being places of encounter, support, and refuge, have also been the scene of many episodes of violence among migrants, in particular numerous stabbings by individuals or groups who have taken advantage of the informal, unruly spaces generated around the Trieste refugee hub to blackmail or rob their fellow migrants (Curzi, 2024; Il Gazzettino, 2023; Il Piccolo, 2023).

The authorities' ambivalent approach to the presence of migrants in the city has therefore consisted of providing delayed and partial support and implicitly harassing many of them by not providing accommodation for all, while at the same time keeping a relatively low profile with regard to the presence of migrants in the areas described above, and in particular in the Silos, prior to the eviction and subsequent relocation of all Silos residents in June 2024 (Pribetti, 2024). Despite the daily presence of police (or other law enforcement) patrols in the square, especially after some of the violent incidents mentioned above, the authorities have maintained a mostly discreet presence over time, and there have been no reports of violent clashes with law enforcement since 2020 when the last notorious pushback operations took place. The police tend to stay on the fringes of the square, although they will sometimes walk around the square, usually when they are looking for someone. There were also numerous 'political raids' on the Silos in the months leading up to its closure,

but in most cases, these involved checking the residents' documents and taking the undocumented to register and identify them (Trieste Cafè, 2023).

While local activists might see the presence of law enforcement as an indirect form of repression (Fieldnotes, June 2024), their work in the square to support migrants has not been significantly affected by it, with the exception of the placing of fencing around the statue of the Empress Sissi, which has been read as a form of 'spatial harassment'. At the same time, some of the migrants we interviewed stated that they felt safer with a police presence, as this acted to deter violence by gangs who blackmail more vulnerable migrants or even put pressure on some of the organizations working in the square. This seems to be a paradoxical effect (or perhaps a deliberate one) of the 'no camp' policy implemented in recent years, particularly by the local authorities: even the presence of the police and the possibility of one day being transferred to a camp was described by our interviewees as a highly desirable perspective. Is then Trieste really so beautiful in full daylight?

## IS TRIESTE BEAUTIFUL IN FULL DAYLIGHT?

As we complete this chapter, arrivals from Bosnia and Herzegovina are increasing once again. However, as previously noted, while 'Arab' migrants (so described by their peers from other countries) are present in Bosnia and Herzegovina and also cross from there into Croatia, they generally do not come to Trieste, with few exceptions. Those who arrive in Trieste are mainly Afghans, Pakistanis, Bengalis, and, more recently, also Nepalese. At night-time, Syrian and Kurdish families may pass through the city for a few hours, usually waiting for someone to help them on their way. Trieste, with all its contradictions and forms of implicit abandonment by the authorities, remains in all respects a safe place (especially in comparison with other situations experienced along the Route) and above all a point of arrival after clandestine journeys through forests, mountains, and rivers, but also over walls and dangerous borders often with direct or indirect violence on the part of the border authorities.

The city of Trieste is very beautiful, and I like it a lot. Also, here there is peace and quiet. No one argues with you [...]. Along the Route people are killed and since I've been here, I've never heard of anyone being killed by another. In fact, I would like to stay here because I would have found a job opportunity. (Refugee from Pakistan, 22, interviewed in Urdu, Trieste, July 2023)

According to our interviewees, the main places of interest for migrants in Trieste, especially Piazza della Libertà, are known to many before they reach the city, or at least to those who advise them to go there once they arrive. In

this sense, Trieste remains potentially ‘beautiful by night’ for most of them, despite the inadequacy of the reception facilities provided by the authorities and the lengthy and uncertain procedures for recognizing their humanitarian status. In Trieste, they find volunteers and local organizations ready to help them on arrival and, if necessary, to treat their wounds and provide medical care for illnesses acquired during their harsh journey and time spent in the forest. They also find a relatively safe environment and a selection of places where they can become visible again, socialize, and finally think about their next steps.

The day after my arrival in the square [Piazza della Libertà] I received a tent and same blankets from the volunteers and a boy in the square told me that I could sleep in Silos. (Refugee from Pakistan, 39, interviewed in Pashtu, Trieste, August 2023)

I go there [in the square] and I also turn to volunteer organizations when I need something, especially for medical assistance. (Refugee from India, 34, interviewed in Hindi, Trieste, September 2023)

Hence, some of our interviewees reported that the feeling of having finally arrived somewhere – and the associated subsiding of the adrenaline rush experienced while en route – caused them to become depressed. This was partly due to anxiety about the bureaucratic challenges ahead and to the realization that they were far from home with an uncertain future. In addition, many of the interviews, especially those conducted in the Silos in the days leading up to the evictions, revealed that these migrants had never expected to live for months in such conditions, nor to be forced, at least in part, to return to ‘nature’, to a sort of urban *selva*, where they had slept in tents or on makeshift beds in a building infested with aggressive rats, without water or any other utilities. Not surprisingly, many of those forced to live in the Silos fell ill there because of the living conditions, especially the cold, the rats, and the lack of running water.

I want to add one thing; people come here with a lot of hopes and expectations by going severe threats and harsh conditions but when they arrive here and find such a situation, they lose their hopes and get damaged internally. Here the difficulties are too much. The pots are infected and a lot of rats are going up and down here. I don’t know which organization can help us. It is not just my opinion, all of us think like this. But fortunately, some good people also come here and help us. Let’s hope the situation gets better. We came here with a big hope of humanity. Everyone says around the world that people in Europe will treat you the same way they treat their own people. (Refugee from Pakistan, 32, interviewed in Urdu, Trieste, June 2024)

This preliminary analysis of how ‘the Route is seen from Trieste’ or ‘Trieste is seen from the Route’, which is mainly based on interviews with migrants and extensive participant observation, allows us to advance some brief final

observations. First, as repeatedly stated, Trieste was known as a final destination to the majority of our interviewees, almost all of whom arrived via Bosnia and Herzegovina, and most of whom were Afghans, Pakistanis, and Bengalis. Second, Trieste, as a crossing point and gateway to Western Europe, is used as a transit point by an increasing number of migrants, who intend to travel on to other parts of Italy or to France or England. Third, Trieste enjoys a solid reputation as a safe place among the migrants we interviewed, despite many concerns about aspects of the reception system, most notably the ambivalent attitude of the authorities, especially at the local level. Fourth, Trieste, together with Bihać and other transit points in Bosnia and Herzegovina, has recently been one of the few places along the Route where migrants remain visible outside the camps. It is therefore the only place where volunteers, activists, researchers, or journalists can go to provide help to migrants and to directly and freely involve them in their research, reporting, and political demonstrations. As we write, in all the other countries crossed by the Route, migrants are either in camps or have made themselves invisible with the assistance of increasingly powerful and sophisticated networks of smugglers.

Fifth, and perhaps most importantly, despite the authorities' relatively low-key and sometimes lenient approach to managing the presence of migrants in the city – particularly around the railway station, in Piazza della Libertà, and especially in the Silos, one of the most enduring makeshift camps along the Route – the spatial harassment and neglect experienced by hundreds of individuals who are legally present in Trieste seriously challenge the notion that the city truly offers a *'civitas'* to these people-on-the-move. Waiting times and difficult living conditions in camps are unfortunately a central aspect of the experience of most asylum seekers, as Khosravi (2010) and many others have pointed out. However, for some migrants, the experience of spending months in a rat-infested squat has made them feel, although they are now in Trieste, as though they have gone back to navigating the threshold between *civitas* and *selva*. Illegally occupying a building and living there in precarious conditions implies not only a partial return to invisibility, but also a kind of 'return to nature', something that increasingly dehumanizes and debilitates the migrants, to the point that they may now perceive a future placement in a camp as highly desirable (see Carter-White & Minca, 2025). The denial of a place in a camp, as much of our interview data suggests, implies for many the perpetuation of the conditions of the *selva* in another form, despite the assistance and freedom of movement offered by the city.

To return to the title of the documentary from which we started out, Trieste is certainly beautiful at night; it has been, and remains, a key point of arrival on the Balkan Route. For many, it also represents safety and an end to the direct border violence to which they were constantly exposed during their journey. However, only when the authorities choose to provide all of them with

the hospitality and protection they are entitled to – thereby offering them what every ‘return to the *civitas*’ should entail after their long ordeal in the ‘*selva*’ – will Trieste not only be beautiful at night, but may also become in every respect the safe haven to which many aspire during their perilous journeys. Only then will Trieste also be beautiful in full daylight, for everyone.

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